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TELEVISION REVIEW

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## Switch to cable hasn't altered Stossel's aim

By Sam Allis, Globe Staff | December 17, 2009

John Stossel has made a television career out of irritating people. For 28 years at ABC's "20/20" news magazine, he gleefully punctured conventional wisdom as he saw it.

While at "20/20," for example, he challenged Columbia University undergraduates over their refusal to let a right-wing advocate speak there. He let them spout off in front of the camera on why the man shouldn't be given a forum there while straight-facedly calling themselves First Amendment supporters.

If Stossel didn't exist, someone would have to invent him. However objectionable he is to some, Stossel exposes holes in our body politic and cultural mores, and he forces us to review and defend our positions. He can also be a tiresome partisan who gleefully ridicules the other side, which, given his libertarian slant, is usually the political left.

He recently left his longtime perch at ABC News for the Fox Business Network, where his new one-hour show, "Stossel," airs Thursdays at 8 p.m. If last week's opener is any indication, tonight's show on health care should be spirited, if predictable. (Next week will feature Ayn Rand's novel "Atlas Shrugged," a libertarian bible.)

The subject last week was global warming, a luscious target made sweeter by the struggling international meeting in Copenhagen to do something about it. With help from two guests, Stossel had a field day.

"Stossel" is shot in a small studio with a small live audience made up of people who had applied for tickets. The host remains the trim, glib, occasionally snide figure viewers have come to know. He sat alone on a tall stool on stage and laid out his case that global warming is yet another false scare whipped up by the media and politicians

For context, he cited what he called false scares in the past: Y2K, breast implants alleged to cause cancer but that didn't; the SARS bird flu that never lived up to its deadly reputation in this country; ditto for Mad Cow Disease.

To attack global warming Stossel first aired a few of the truly overheated television ads from advocates. He also brought on Jerry Taylor, the environmental expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, who is a practiced and fluent disbeliever of the phenomenon. He talked with the ease of a witness who had been coached by his lawyer. Sadly, Taylor was never really challenged by the polite audience and batted away their critical questions.

Taylor argued that we should monitor temperatures before committing huge effort and money on global warming. He was joined by Stephen Dubner, coauthor of the bestseller "Freakonomics," who favors pumping sulphur phosphate into the upper atmosphere to swaddle the earth in a haze that would reduce temperatures.

The classic Stossel moment came when he produced an electric golf cart he acquired for the exact amount of money as its federal tax subsidy for alternative energy vehicles. In other words, these things are free, and he wonders why the taxpayers should be subsidizing golf carts.

At the end of the show, we learned that the libertarian solution to global warming is wealth creation. As poor countries become richer, the theory goes, the better they will be able to improve the quality of life of their poor. This is a fine idea but beside the point.

Stossel, meanwhile, continues his merry crusade to demolish conventional wisdom. That many find him wrong

has never slowed him down. He revels as he infuriates. But it would be nice in his new show to see him go after the ultimate government absurdity, the Pentagon.

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